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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference among attitudes of teachers in the Quitman Consolidated School District (Mississippi) toward assertive discipline when the variables of grade level, gender, and years of experience were considered. Significant differences were sought between: (1) elementary, junior high, and high school teachers; (2) attitudes of male and female teachers; and (3) attitudes of teachers with varying lengths of experience. The population of the study were 159 teachers in grades kindergarten through 12, 97 of whom responded to the survey questionnaire. Results indicated that the variables of gender and years of experience were not significantly different. Based on the results, it is concluded that junior high teachers perceive assertive discipline as more effective than do elementary or high school teachers. A large majority of junior high school teachers felt that assertive discipline had a positive effect in their classroom and on the school as a whole. (JD)

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Attitudes Toward Assertive Discipline

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Introduction

Twenty years ago Gallup began polling the public's opinion of educational issues. In all but one of those twenty years, the respondents to these surveys chose discipline as the number one problem facing the public schools (Watts, 1989, p. 19).

As a result of this concern, there have been a host of alternative discipline models designed to deal with discipline problems and there are many claims regarding the effectiveness of these various strategies and techniques.

One of the alternative techniques claiming to be highly successful is Lee Canter's "Assertive Discipline" plan. Canter (1976) defines Assertive Discipline as a systematic approach which enables teachers to set firm, consistent, positive limits for students while remaining cognizant of their needs for warmth and support for appropriate behavior (p. 2).

The Assertive Discipline training program has been presented to over 400,000 educators throughout the United States since its introduction in 1976 (McCormack, 1988, p. 5). In view of the widespread use of Canter's model, coupled with the public's concern over discipline, it would seem to be of considerable importance to educators that systematic, objective

evaluations of the Assertive Discipline program be undertaken to determine its degree of effectiveness.

A review of the literature indicates that only 11 research projects (ten dissertations and one university study) have examined the use of the Assertive Discipline program (McCormack, 1988, p. 5). Considering the multitude of students affected by Canter's method, this represents limited research. Additional research on the degree of effectiveness of the program is definitely warranted, allowing educators to make intelligent decisions regarding the usefulness of the program in their own school settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference among attitudes of teachers in the Quitman Consolidated School District toward assertive discipline when the variables of level [elementary (K-5), junior high (6-9), and high school (10-12)], gender, and years of experience were considered.

Research Questions

To structure the problem, answers were sought to the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference among the attitudes of elementary, junior high and high school

teachers toward an assertive discipline plan as measured by a self-developed instrument?

2. Is there a significant difference in the attitudes of male teachers and female teachers toward an assertive discipline plan as measured by a self-developed instrument?

3. Is there a significant difference in the attitudes of teachers with varying lengths of experience toward an assertive discipline plan as measured by a self-developed instrument?

Limitations

1. The study is limited to the Quitman Consolidated School District in the 1988-89 school year.

2. Generalization of the results of this study can only be inferred to similar school districts.

3. Any perceptions which were analyzed as a result of the responses were held to be accurate and to be those of the respondent only.

Definition of Terms

1. **Assertive Discipline** -- a systematic approach to behavior modification which enables teachers to set firm, consistent limits for students while remaining cognizant of their needs for warmth and positive support.

2. Discipline -- techniques and strategies the teacher uses to develop self-control in the classroom.

3. Quitman Consolidated School District -- a Clark County, Mississippi, school system for grades kindergarten through twelve serving 2,883 students, 2,095 in grades kindergarten through eight and 788 in grades nine through twelve.

Review of the Literature

Assertive Discipline was developed as a product of seven years of research and evaluation based on observations of master teachers. Assertive Discipline resulted from exposure to the theoretical and practical aspects of Assertive Training and was introduced by Lee and Marlene Canter (1976) with the publication of their book Assertive Discipline: A Take-Charge Approach for Today's Educator.

Assertive Training allows teachers to respond to their students in an assertive manner by clearly expressing their wants and needs. By being prepared to back up their words with appropriate action, they were better able to exhibit the competence and confidence necessary to assert their influence and deal effectively with discipline problems. In other words, teachers respond in a manner which maximizes their

potential to get their needs met, but does not violate the best interests of their students.

The Canters and their associates applied Assertive Training to teaching by stating that teachers have the following rights (1976):

1. The right to establish a classroom structure and routine that provides the optimal learning environment in light of the teacher's own strengths and weaknesses.

2. The right to determine and request appropriate behavior from the students which meets the teacher's needs and encourages the positive social and educational development of the child.

3. The right to ask for help from parents, the principal, etc., when the teacher needs assistance with a child (p. 2).

Canter (1979) cited objectives of the Assertive Discipline model: (a) to develop a set of firm, fair, consistent rules of behavior, (b) to establish limit-setting consequences for negative behavior, (c) to set appropriate consequences for positive behavior, and (d) to plan what is necessary to implement the limit-setting and/or positive consequences as they relate to the rules (p. 33).

The principles of Assertive Discipline are much like those of B. F. Skinner's Behavior Modification (1971). The primary Assertive Discipline is a competency-based approach to discipline. The following are the competency skills Canter (1980) determined should follow in order to deal assertively with student behavior:

1. The teacher must know at all times what he or she wants the students to do. The teacher must communicate verbally and visually what these wants are.

2. The teacher must know how to systematically set limits when the students do not behave properly. Consistency is the key to limit-setting. A teacher must provide a negative consequence every time a student chooses to behave inappropriately. The consequence must be included in a systematic discipline plan.

3. The teacher must know how to systematically reinforce the appropriate behavior of students. Effective positive reinforcement of appropriate behavior is the key to dealing assertively with discipline problems. Be sure to praise every student every day. The most effective way of backing up verbal reinforcement is with action, such as sending positive notes home, special awards, special privileges or

material awards. Classwide reinforcement enables all students to earn a positive consequence for appropriate behavior. When the class has earned one reward, set a new goal. Always remember that the reward must be something the students really want.

4. The teacher must know how to elicit the cooperation of the principal and the parents in discipline efforts with problem students. For a teacher's discipline plan to be effective, it must be shared with the principal and the parents, and it must systematically spell out when and how they are to cooperate with the teacher in implementing the plan (p. 106).

Canter (1979) believed the following constitutes an effective discipline plan:

1. Set down some basic general rules of behavior such as: follow directions; raise hand before speaking; stay in seat; keep hands, feet and objects to yourself; no cursing or teasing. Time should be set aside for discussing these rules at the beginning of the year. These rules and their positive and negative consequences should be posted in the classroom, to remain throughout the school year.

2. Allow a maximum of five negative consequences for disruptive behavior. Here is a hypothetical plan.

The first time a student breaks one of the rules, his or her name is put on the board as a warning. The second time, a check mark is put next to the name and the student must stay after school for fifteen minutes. The third time, a second check is made, which means thirty minutes after school. The fourth time, a third check is made, which means thirty minutes after school, plus a phone call to the student's parents. The fifth means four check marks and the student is sent to the principal.

3. In cases of severe disruption, the student is sent immediately to the principal.

4. The principal is always the last consequence in the plan; he or she must approve the teacher's plan before it is put into operation and must be notified if any changes are made in it. In addition, the principal and teacher should decide in advance what will be done with students who are sent to the principal's office. All consequences, both positive and negative, should indicate one thing clearly to the student and parents: the teacher and school really care about the student. They care so much they are prepared to use all means at their disposal to influence the students in positive directions.

5. At the end of the day, all the names and check marks should be erased. Never erase a name or check mark as a reward for good behavior.

6. A copy of the discipline plan should be sent to all the parents.

7. The plan applies to all students in the classroom. If after three days or so the plan does not appear to be working with one or more of the students, make the plan stricter (p. 41).

It is important to note that the Canters have cautioned teachers that Assertive Discipline should be viewed as a beginning model for teachers needing to establish control in their classrooms. After students know the rules and have learned to comply with them, the Canters urge teachers to use the more democratic and student-centered approaches available in other models (1981, p. 9).

The following are strengths and limitations of the Assertive Discipline plan, according to Wolfgang and Glickman (1983):

Strengths

1. The use of class time is more efficient.

2. A single system of rules, rewards and punishment can be used for all age levels and kinds of students; there is no need to vary one's approach.

3. The teacher can be confident and efficient with discipline because he or she has a set program to follow.

Limitations

1. It may fail to recognize "circumstantial" evidence for misbehavior and the need to give special attention to or plan for an individual student.

2. Punishments may not work.

3. It is undemocratic and authoritarian in that students have little say in rules and procedures (p. 201).

In conclusion, it seems a bleak time for teachers. For 19 of the last 20 years, the public has said that it considers discipline to be the biggest problem facing the nations public schools, according to the Gallup Polls (Watts, 1989, p. 19). Violence, along with the problems of busing, bilingualism, special education mainstreaming, teacher strikes, changing of neighborhoods, the rise of drug abuse among students, single-parent families, and many other problems make education a challenging profession and dramatically different from what it was 10 to 15 years ago.

Obviously, to develop a school discipline policy that would please everyone would be impossible. Perhaps the only real public consensus on school

discipline is that a climate conducive to learning must exist in the classroom and that the responsibility for developing and maintaining such a climate falls squarely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher.

Methods and Procedures

Sample

The population for the study was 159 teachers who teach 2,883 students in grades kindergarten through twelve in the Quitman Consolidated School and who are required to use Assertive Discipline techniques to modify student behavior. The Quitman Consolidated School is a county school, generally considered to be "rural" by nature. Kindergarten through grade eight consists of 2,095 students. Grades nine through twelve consists of 788 students.

Instrument

The 26-item survey instrument was designed by the researcher to be used to assess the attitudes toward Lee Canter's Assertive Discipline program.

The instrument is comprised of 26 perceptual items and five demographic items. Survey instructions include rating each item using the Likert scale: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) don't know or not applicable, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree.

Time necessary for completion of the survey involves 5 to 10 minutes.

Collection of the Data

Through cooperation with the District's superintendent, principals were instructed to deliver the instrument to all certified staff members on February 23, 1989, to be returned to the researcher by February 28, 1989. The surveys were delivered to 159 teachers by the various principals, with the exception of one school which preferred the researcher to do so. Completion of the survey was not mandatory and out of 159 surveys delivered, 97 were returned to the researcher for analysis.

Treatment of the Data

The data were recorded on a computer disk for analysis by the Thomas E. Tramel Computing Center at Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi. The SPSS-X educational and psychological package was used to measure the Cronbach coefficient alpha determining the reliability of the self-developed 26-item instrument. One-way analysis of variance was used to determine significant differences for level, gender, and years of experience. A Scheffe post hoc test was applied to determine which groups differed significantly.

Results

An initial determination of reliability for the self-developed instrument used Cronbach's coefficient alpha and revealed a statistical measure of .70, which is an acceptable measure of reliability, according to Cohen (1975). One-way analysis of variance revealed a significant difference for level. The F ratio of 4.4172 was significant at the .05 level of confidence. Data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Data for Attitudes Toward an Assertive Discipline Plan

Variable	df	ss	ms	F Ratio
Level				
Between Groups	2	362.1641	181.8821	4.4172*
Within Groups	72	2951.6225	40.9948	
Total	74	3313.7867		
Gender				
Between Groups	1	4.2431	4.2431	.0997
Within Groups	95	4042.3961	42.5515	
Total	96	4046.6392		
Age				
Between Groups	5	245.3161	49.0632	1.1745
Within Groups	91	3801.3231	41.7728	
Total	96	4046.6392		

*Indicates significance at .05 level ($F \geq 3.166$, df2,72)

Results of a Scheffe post hoc test revealed a difference between Group 1 (Elementary: K-5) and Group 2 (Junior High: 6-9). Data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Condescriptive Data for Level: Elementary, Junior High, High School

Variable	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
Group 1: Elementary	21	82.5714	7.3183
Group 2: Junior High	23	87.8696	7.7536
Group 3: High School	31	87.0645	4.3123
Total	75	86.0533	6.6919

Scheffe post hoc results showed Group 1 differed significantly from Group 2. The lower mean for elementary teachers (N = 21) indicated that they reported attitudes less positively than did junior high teachers (N = 23)

Elementary teachers' attitudes toward Assertive Discipline were reported as more negative than those of the junior high teachers. The means for the two groups were: Group 1, 82.5714 (standard deviation = 7.3183); and Group 2, 87.8696 (standard deviation 7.7536). Junior high teachers reported more positive attitudes toward Assertive Discipline.

The variables of gender and years of experience were not significantly different.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study it could be concluded that junior high teachers perceive Assertive Discipline as more effective than do elementary or high school teachers.

Other researchers report support for the position that Assertive Discipline is particularly effective in the middle grades. Allen (1983) found in a study of seventh and eighth-grade students that there was a significant decrease in the number of referrals after the implementation of Assertive Discipline. He found that the annual number of referrals decreased by 31.8% since the implementation of the plan. Furthermore, when Allen surveyed the staff of that junior high school, the survey revealed that 91.4% felt that Assertive Discipline had a positive effect in their classroom, and 98.5% thought that Assertive Discipline had a positive effect on the school as a whole.

Bauer (1982) stated that ninth-grade teachers using Assertive Discipline in the school he studied reported greater satisfaction with their roles in the classroom compared to teachers from a school using various models of classroom discipline.

When percentages of responses for survey question 19 (Discipline at my school is consistent) for the three levels were compared, it revealed that junior high teachers perceived discipline at their school to be more consistent. Of the 44 elementary teachers participating, 48% responded with a positive answer to question 19. Of the 23 high school teachers, only 30% gave a positive response, but of the 30 junior high teachers, 60% perceived discipline at their school to be consistent.

It appears that a correlation exists between the perceived degree of consistency and the perceived degree of effectiveness of the Assertive Discipline plan.

Considering the widespread use of Canter's Assertive Discipline plan, the public's great concern over discipline and because review of the literature indicates limited research; additional research is warranted. Further research studies could also include administrators, parents and students' perceptions of the Assertive Discipline plan. With reliability of the self-developed instrument established, additional use of the instrument is a possibility, perhaps to compare different geographical samplings or for comparisons in

other types of settings; for example, in youth correctional institutions.

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